



READING MODERNIST POETRY IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

INDIA: RELEVANCE AND DISSENSIONS

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Paper Received On: 18 MAR 2023

Peer Reviewed On: 31 MAR 2023

Published On: 1 APRIL 2023

Abstract

This paper analyses the importance of reading Modernist poetry in contemporary India. While Modernist Poetry continues to be taught at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels at various universities, some postcolonial researchers and scholars have argued against the teaching of British Modernist poetry in contemporary India, calling it 'colonial hangover.' This paper analyses the relevance and use of teaching and reading my modernist British poetry in contemporary India.

Keywords: Modernist Poetry, fragmentation, alienation



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1. Introduction

Modernist Poetry is an influential style of writing that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century and persisted until the late 1940s. It draws inspiration from both classical myths and contemporary social and political upheavals alike. The movement was a rejection of the old poetic idiom and created new forms and techniques. Imagism was one of its key features, with many poets using symbolism to convey their ideas. It challenges traditional methods while changing how readers think about their works. Modernist poets rejected the traditional structure of poetry, which lacked a consistent rhyme scheme, metrical pattern or musical form. Instead they use literary devices like symbolism and imagery to foster deeper connections between themselves and their readers. They also experimented with different types of poems, such as imagistic, symbolic, and realist styles. Imagistic styles provide concrete images for readers to interpret while symbols and realist styles give readers a more detailed picture of the subject at hand. Many poems of the time combined these two styles, such as Eliot's "The Waste Land."

Stream of consciousness was another important technique that many Modernist writers employed when crafting their poetry; this allowed them to tell fragmented stories that represented society's disarrayed state at that time. Some of the Modernist poets were part of an expatriate community in Paris that provided them with a platform to experiment with writing styles. Renowned authors such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy participated in these salons along with the likes of T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. Modernist poets also dabbled with free verse, while others preferred a more structured approach. They frequently employed meters - repeating sounds that help the reader follow along with the poem's rhyme scheme. Styles, such as free verse and pictorial imagery allowed them to craft more elaborate works that addressed multiple topics simultaneously. This approach also enabled them to craft more captivating stories. They could explore various topics and sometimes even include characters' inner thoughts; however, techniques like disjunction and free verse require readers to read at their own pace in order to fully appreciate the content. T. S. Eliot argued for the complexity of poetry in the essay, "The Metaphysical Poets". He writes:

“...poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” (T. S. Eliot on “the Metaphysical Poets”)

Therefore reading modernist poems can be challenging due to their often disparate techniques used for expression. Some modernist poets, such as John Ashbery, used words with multiple meanings to convey their message. Others, like Marianne Moore, experimented with breaking syllables and punctuation to make their sentences more expressive. Modernist poets often incorporated different countries and cultures into their poems, as they saw many nations as part of one global community; diversity was an essential aspect of their writing. Modernist poetry is an innovative and creative style of poetry that challenges traditional conventions and rules in literature. New experiments are made in form, style, themes, and word games. This movement began during the early twentieth century and continued until after World War II. Modernism's emphasis on social and political issues marked a major turning point from Romanticism, which prioritized traditional forms and subject matters in its

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literature. Modernist poetry emphasized the connection between oneself and its environment. This resulted in an increased focus on both physical environment and human body. Modernist poetry introduced a number of innovations such as collage and found poetry to provide readers with an exciting experience and to push them to explore their emotions differently.

1.1 Predecessors of Modernist Poetry

Modernist poetry draws upon a range of techniques and styles in order to create its own distinctive forms. These may include experimenting with language, using unconventional verse structures, and focusing on internal thoughts rather than external details. In the early twentieth century, literary experimentation took a dramatic turn. Poets such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot sought to challenge traditional structures of poetry and find new ways of expressing themselves creatively. Many experiments were inspired by the devastation of World War I, which had devastated much of Europe and affected people around the globe. As writers and artists sought new representations of their experiences, many turned to experimental art forms for inspiration. Poets were spurred on by this trauma to explore new methods of representation and find a way to express their ideas to the world, particularly T. S. Eliot. Modernist poetry is a form of literature that seeks to define and comprehend the present by drawing upon historical influences while creating something entirely new.

1.2 Features of Modernist Poetry

Modernist poetry stands out by breaking away from traditional literary subjects, forms and styles. This break is commonly referred to as the 'modernist element' in literature and involves various experimental writing techniques such as blended imagery/themes, absurdism, nonlinear narratives and stream of consciousness--an inner monologue that takes on new life. Modernist poetry emphasizes consciousness, as these poets strive to depict characters' inner monologues and use details and experiences in order to convey a sense of connectedness between the individual and their environment. The rise of this new style of writing occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due to factors such as industrialization, rapid social change, capitalism, and advances in science and psychology (e.g., Freudian theory). Many writers at that time felt increasingly alienated from Victorian morality, optimism, and convention and sought a more personal approach to art and life. A hallmark of this movement was its experimentation with form and style, including the abandonment of rhyme and meter. Poets such as Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Allen

Ginsberg sought to challenge traditional rules of poetic expression and explore unorthodox methods for conveying emotions.

Another hallmark of this genre was its emphasis on individualism, which put the spotlight on characters rather than society as a whole. This allowed for an insightful look into characters' minds which led to more intricate and detailed stories. Modernist writers employed a variety of other techniques to convey their messages. These included word games and the use of multiple perspectives, which added depth to the stories. In this era, some poets attempted to uncover the innermost desires and thoughts of their readers through confessional poems. These works were often inspired by visual art and psychoanalysis. These authors created short story-length pieces that often featured epiphanies and revelations about the protagonist's inner thoughts and feelings. These became some of the most popular modernist works in English-language poetry. Modernist writing evolved out of the experience of living in large cities. Urbanites often felt lost and alone, leading poets to turn inward and focus on their own imagination as a means to confront the sense of loneliness that many experienced after World War I. This style served as an attempt at combating feelings of anxiety that many felt living in cities.

2. Imagism in Modernist Poetry

Imagism is a modernist movement in poetry that originated in the early twentieth century, characterized by a focus on precise and concrete sensory imagery. The Imagists emphasized the use of simple, direct language and the rejection of traditional poetic forms and conventions. The Imagist movement began in London in 1912, with the publication of *Des Imagistes* an anthology edited by American poet Ezra Pound. The anthology included works by Pound, H.D., Richard Aldington, and F.S. Flint, among others. Pound is considered the founder of the movement, and his early poetry is often cited as the quintessential example of Imagist poetry. Imagism is characterized by its focus on precise and concrete sensory imagery. Imagist poets sought to convey complex ideas and emotions through simple, direct language and the use of images that were specific and vivid. They rejected the use of traditional poetic forms and conventions, such as rhyme and meter, in favor of free verse. The Imagists believed that poetry should be a kind of crystalline moment, capturing a single image or idea in a way that was both immediate and timeless. They sought to create poems that were concise, powerful, and memorable, and that could stand alone as works of art. Imagism had a significant impact on modernist poetry, and its influence can be seen in the

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work of many poets who followed in its wake. The Imagists helped to usher in a new era of poetic experimentation, breaking free from the formal constraints of traditional poetry and paving the way for a more subjective and personal approach to writing. The movement also contributed to a broader cultural shift towards modernism, which rejected the traditional values and beliefs of the past and embraced a new sense of individualism, experimentation, and innovation. In this way, Imagism helped to shape the artistic and intellectual landscape of the early twentieth century.

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Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a classic example of the movement's emphasis on visual imagery. "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough." (Poetry Foundation) This two-line poem exemplifies the movement's principles by using precise, vivid imagery to convey a complex idea in a concise manner. The first line, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd," evokes the idea of a large gathering of people, with faces that seem to appear suddenly or unexpectedly. The use of the word "apparition" creates a ghostly, mysterious atmosphere, as though the faces are not quite real. However, the word "these" suggests that the faces are somehow significant, drawing attention to the fact that they are appearing in this particular crowd. The second line, "Petals on a wet, black bough," uses a metaphor to describe the faces. The comparison of the faces to petals is both delicate and beautiful, evoking the fleeting nature of human interactions. The use of "wet, black bough" creates a sense of melancholy and suggests that the faces are a moment of beauty in an otherwise dreary world. By using sensory details, such as the wetness of the bough and the appearance of the faces, the poem draws the reader into the scene and creates a vivid, memorable experience. The poem is a classic example of Imagist poetry, with its focus on sensory imagery and the use of metaphor to convey complex ideas in a concise manner.

H.D.'s "Oread" is another famous Imagist poem:

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us—
cover us with your pools of fir. (Poetry Foundation, “Oread by H.D. | Poetry Foundation”)

This famous Imagist poem exemplifies the movement’s emphasis on vivid, sensory imagery. The poem focuses on the power of the natural world, particularly the sea, and uses vivid descriptions to create a strong sense of atmosphere and emotion. The poem begins with the command “Whirl up, sea,” which sets the tone for the rest of the poem. The imperative verb “whirl” creates a sense of movement and urgency, suggesting that the speaker is calling forth the power of the sea. The repeated use of the word “whirl” in the first line creates a sense of rhythm and repetition, reinforcing the poem’s central theme of the natural world’s power. The second and third lines of the poem describe the sea’s “pointed pines” and “great pines,” which suggest the towering waves and crashing surf. The use of the word “splash” in the second line creates a sense of violence and energy, suggesting the sea’s power to shape the land. The fourth and fifth lines of the poem use the imperative verb “hurl” to describe the sea’s action of covering the rocks with green. The use of the color green suggests the sea’s power to bring life to the land. The final line of the poem, “cover us with your pools of fir,” evokes a sense of protection and shelter, as though the speaker is seeking refuge from the sea’s power. With its focus on vivid, sensory imagery and its emphasis on the power of the natural world, its use of repetition and imperatives the poem creates a sense of urgency and power.

2.1 Significance of Imagism in Contemporary India

Today, the influence of Imagism can still be seen in the work of many contemporary poets, who continue to explore new forms of expression and experimentation in their writing. The Imagist movement had a significant impact on the development of modern poetry in English and influenced many poets around the world, including in India. Reading imagist poems in India can be significant for several reasons. It can introduce readers to a new style of poetry that emphasizes visual and sensory images. This can be a refreshing change from more traditional forms of poetry that may be more common in India. Imagist poetry often

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deals with universal themes and emotions that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. This can help readers in India connect with the experiences and perspectives of people from other parts of the world. The imagist movement also had a significant impact on the development of Modernist literature in India, particularly in the works of poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and A.K. Ramanujan. By reading Imagist poems, Indian readers can gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of these poets and their work. Overall, reading imagist poems can broaden readers' perspectives and introduce them to new ideas and styles of poetry, making it a valuable pursuit for anyone interested in literature and culture in India. There are several significant benefits, including exposure to a different literary tradition. Although Indian literature has a rich history, but reading Imagist poems can expose readers to a different literary tradition, one that emphasizes clarity and precision of language, which can be a refreshing change of pace. It also helps to understand different perspectives as these poems often present a different way of looking at the world, which can broaden one's perspective and understanding of the world. The sensory images used in these poems can evoke emotions and provide a deeper understanding of the human experience.

Reading Imagist poems can also help readers develop their language skills, particularly their ability to use descriptive and sensory language. This can be particularly beneficial for students and aspiring writers who want to improve their creative writing skills. Therefore reading Imagist poems in India today can be a valuable and enriching experience, providing readers with exposure to a different literary tradition, new perspectives, and an appreciation for the beauty of language.

3. Reading Modernist Poetry in Contemporary India

Reading Modernist poetry is important for understanding the current state of Indian society and culture. It helps to contextualize our lives within a cultural framework, enabling us to better comprehend our place in the world and our relationship with others. By delving into the works of great poets like T.S Eliot, we can gain insight into how different forces have shaped India over time, and how these forces continue to shape us today. modernist poetry continues to influence contemporary Indian poetry. Many poets in India today, such as Arundhati Subramaniam, Jeet Thayil, and Sudeep Sen, have been influenced by the modernist poets of the past, including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. These poets have incorporated modernist techniques and themes into their work, bringing new life

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to the modernist tradition in India. When asked about the biggest influences on her poetry Arundhati Subramaniam replied, “My influences are as varied as *Wallace Stevens*, *TS Eliot*, *Adrienne Rich*, *Basho*, *Tukaram*, *Akka Mahadevi*, *Sangam poetry*, *Denise Levertov* and *Neruda*! I admire *AK Ramanujan* as poet and as translator, and *Arun Kolatkar* as well.”

Secondly, modernist poetry speaks to the experiences of individuals in contemporary India. Modernist poets sought to express the complexity and fragmentation of modern life, which remains relevant today in India's rapidly changing society. The individualistic themes of modernist poetry resonate with many Indians who are grappling with issues of identity, culture, and tradition in a rapidly modernizing world.

Lastly, modernist poetry remains important for its contribution to the development of Indian literature and the wider literary world. The modernist movement was a significant departure from traditional literary forms and paved the way for experimentation and innovation in poetry and other forms of literature. Its influence can be seen in contemporary Indian literature and beyond, making it an important part of the literary canon.

In conclusion, while modernist poetry may not be as widely read or studied as it once was, it remains relevant in 21st century India for its influence on contemporary poetry, its relevance to modern individual experiences, and its contribution to the development of Indian literature and the wider literary world. Modernist poetry is known for its emphasis on individualism and freedom of expression, which continues to be relevant in the contemporary Indian society. As India is moving towards a more liberal and democratic society, modernist poetry's emphasis on freedom of expression is particularly important.

Secondly, modernist poetry is also known for its use of language and imagery, which is still influential in contemporary Indian poetry. Many modernist poets have experimented with language and imagery, and their influence can be seen in the work of contemporary Indian poets.

Thirdly, modernist poetry is also relevant because of its ability to explore complex themes and ideas. Modernist poets often tackled complex themes such as identity, cultural displacement, and existentialism, which are still relevant in contemporary Indian society.

In conclusion, while some may argue that modernist poetry has lost its relevance in 21st century India, the continued emphasis on freedom of expression, experimentation with language and imagery, and exploration of complex themes makes modernist poetry still relevant in the contemporary Indian literary scene.

The Indian poetry that has emerged during this time reflects these shifts; it's written from various perspectives by members of India's emerging generation of writers who use various literary forms to examine and reflect upon these transformations.

Alienation is a major theme in Modernist poetry in India and stems from existentialism's ideas. It implies an awareness of one's isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in one's daily existence.

Modernist poetry often centers on the self, yet also attempts to explore the relationship between oneself and other people. Nissim Ezekiel's collection *The End* (1979) examines alienation in an effort to understand why some people feel so alone and unloved.

Another major theme of this generation of writers is gender inequality and injustice, which they address in both their poetry and fiction works. Additionally, they speak about the exploitation of rural women and their struggles to survive in a society that often leaves them out or marginalised.

Sarang and Asaram Lomte have made significant contributions to this genre by exposing the struggles experienced by people from poor, backward and vulnerable backgrounds. Their writing draws from their own experiences and engages with everyday life in a different way than most mainstream fictions which focus on maintaining status quo.

Nabaneeta Bhattacharya and Bhabani Bhuyan are two of the most influential writers in Odia literature. Through their poetry and novels, they explored the shifting social structures and cultural norms within Odia; drawing from their own social backgrounds while engaging with pressing national issues.

They have thus created a strong voice for those marginalised, able to reimagine the world and give voice to those voices not yet heard in Odia literature.

This new generation of writers has been made possible through the mass movements occurring in Odia. They are speaking out against the suffering experienced by those affected by mining and industrialization in their region.

They are writing against the injustices they endure and striving for a more just society. By doing this, they hope to reach people's minds, give them an identity and rights as individuals.

They also possess the capacity to challenge stereotypical ideas and dogmas associated with a certain culture, reimagining and criticizing issues such as sexual abuses, rapes and murders in order to promote change. Modernist poetry from 21st century India presents us

with a complex range of issues and topics. They encompass social, gender, political and environmental concerns; an eclectic range of contemporary motifs and symbols; as well as an exploration of the shifting landscapes these poets write about.

Many of India's contemporary literary issues stem from colonial legacy and how that legacy has impacted postcolonial India's literature. While this has had a lasting effect on writing within India, modernist poetry written today attempts to break away from or subvert that influence.

However, given how deeply embedded colonialism is in India, it's not only difficult to escape or subvert its influence but its significance must also be examined critically. This is especially true for Modernist poetry in 21st century India which seeks to illuminate and articulate those impacted by colonialism through social and cultural experiences.

The colonial legacy has profoundly shaped Indian culture and the literature produced as a result. Not only has this led to the growth of many literary traditions, but it has also altered how writers and poets write about and represent their societies and world.

Modernist poems often draw from vernacular, regional and local languages to express themselves and tell stories. This has been an influential aspect of 21st century Indian modernist poetry's poetics.

Poems often utilize common language and attempt to make sense of what is seen as banal or devalued, in line with 'littleness' which has been identified as an important theme within these modernist works.

Though sometimes dismissed as unimportant or even negative in modernist texts, others have welcomed its value. It can also be seen as a way of affirming the worth of minorities.

Nissim Ezekiel often favored 'littleness' as an expression, editing magazines for "minis" (miniaturists), much in the same way he defended minorities against dominant ideologies in Indian society at that time.

Modernist poets' poetry and the 'little magazines' they published may have been attempts to make sense of a cultural space that felt increasingly fragmented, uncertain and fractured. This could be read as part of globalisation processes at work in terms of creating an atmosphere where everyone felt they belonged.

Alienation has become a prominent theme in modern literature and Indo-English poetry. It often represents an internal conflict that people experience, manifesting itself both

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personally and socially. As such, this topic has been the focus of psychological, sociological, and literary studies.

Anxiety can be described as the experience of feeling disconnected from others and lacking meaning in life. This human condition has been linked to various forms of depression and may prevent people from making decisions or acting upon their convictions.

In colonial India and post-independence India, writers were required to be cultural nationalists who spoke the language of their people and fought for the rights of their country - especially during times of turmoil such as 1950s- 1960s. This sentiment was especially prevalent during periods of turmoil during which literary culture emerged within India itself, such as 1950s- 1960s.

In the 1970s, cultural nationalism in India became associated with modernism. Yashodhara Dalmia notes that 'liberalism' then meant acknowledging that writers within a nation possess greater power than their legislators, and these writers are not simply minor voices but important representatives of nationalist and nativist culture as a whole.

In the late nineties, an emerging group of writers in India began writing with a social conscience. They weren't interested in political issues or making themselves famous; rather, they focused on issues such as poverty and oppression, natural destruction and narratives from mass movements. Poets like Saroj, Bhabani Bhuyan, Bijay Upadhyay, Ravishankar and Lelin Kumar--currently writing in Odisha--bring forth this new stream of humanitarian poetry which had never really existed before.

These poets often draw upon their own experiences to create deeply personal work that conveys a feeling of isolation from others. This human condition can also be linked to various forms of depression and can manifest in both our personal lives and social interactions.

These young poets' poetry speaks to the problems and discontents confronting Indian society today. They touch on a range of issues, such as globalization and its effects on India.

It is noteworthy that Odia has seen a distinct split in literature between pro and anti-establishment views. The former group, who believe in awards and patronage from state and corporate institutions but are apolitical, are losing ground to the growing presence of the latter group which advocates for human rights and environmental preservation.

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